

King and Pacifism: The Other Dimension

Why the uproar over the remarks of Jesse Helms on Martin Luther King Jr.? The North Carolina senator, in raising questions about King's character and his links with communists, was temperate compared with

Colman McCarthy

what we have heard before. J. Edgar Hoover said that King was "the most notorious liar in the country." In 1965, Sheriff Jim Clark, the keeper at the time of Alabama's attack dogs and water hoses, said that "an agitator" like King "is the lowest form of humanity."

During the Senate debate on whether to honor King with a national holiday, Helms, in his twisted way, actually helped the cause. His speeches assured publicity. Without the oversized mouth of Helms, the issue might have passed unnoticed.

King's reputation was damaged more by the supporters of the holiday legislation than by its opponents. He was praised as only a civil rights leader. Sen. Edward Kennedy said that "King worked tirelessly to remove the stain of discrimination from our nation."

King was much, much more than that. At the core of both his thinking and of his commitment as a Christian clergyman was pacifism, as practiced through the techniques of organized nonviolent confrontation. His constituency was not limited to blacks. Liberals like Kennedy do a disservice to King. In limiting their praise of him to civil rights they sanitize the record.

It was King the pacifist who said in April 1967 that "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today [is] my own government." That statement was not quoted on the Senate floor. Nor was his statement that we are "a society gone mad with war . . . If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy

must read 'Vietnam.' It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over."

At some moment, the City of Washington will need a statue of King to go along with his national holiday. Several of King's thoughts are suitable to be chiseled into stone, with a number of sites around town being appropriate for the statue.

In front of the Pentagon, why not a bronzed King saluting the flag with these words underneath: "We

is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons."

Or perhaps the King statue should be placed between the Treasury and the Department of Commerce, with this thought: "Capitalism may lead to a practical materialism that is as pernicious as the theoretical materialism taught by communism."

Maybe Congress will want the King presence on the lawn before the Capitol. If so, King's quote—uttered in early 1968 when the House and Senate were cutting social programs and increasing military spendings—is fit: "The Congress is sick."

For a fourth possible site, there is the new memorial for the 59,000 Americans who died in Vietnam. Put in stone King's memorable words about the troops being sent to Southeast Asia: "Before long they must know that their government has sent them into a struggle among Vietnamese, and the more sophisticated surely realize that we are on the side of the wealthy and the secure while we create a hell for the poor."

These aren't the soothing nose-gays found in quotation books under "Patriotism" where the comments of George Washington, our only other leader to be honored with a national holiday, can be found by schoolchildren. By categorizing King as only a civil rights leader, the Senate of 1983 has pulled off what King himself would not allow his detractors to get away with in the 1960s. After his tactics of nonviolence led to the passage of the 1964 civil rights law, voices of respectability told King to stick to race and leave antiwar dissent to others.

It was the new way of telling blacks to stay in their place. King replied that racism and militarism are diseases spread by the same germ: the contempt of the powerful for the weak. With the world armed with nukes, he said, "it will be worthless to talk about integration if there is no world to integrate."

If the Senate liberals avoided the real King, Ronald Reagan will certainly do so when he signs the bill for the holiday. That leaves it up to the followers of King. To accept him as anything less than a revolutionary pacifist will mean that we are getting just another irrelevant plastic hero.